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ABSTRACT

A number of teachers have for some years been creating lesbian and gay-inclusive college-level composition courses. Teachers who create such courses do so because it is intrinsic to their notion of good teaching, which includes the goal of fostering students' personal relationships with the written word. Many of these teachers often speak of themselves as role models. By virtue of the nearly complete absence of lesbian and gay voices from composition readers, any teacher wanting to create a lesbian and gay-inclusive course will have to do so through deliberate effort, supplying supplementary readings. Teachers thinking about developing such courses sometimes worry about the safety (in terms of job security) of taking on such work. Structure is crucial to creating effective lesbian and gay inclusive courses. Teachers need to have a clearly articulated purpose and plan, or the material can lead to volatile discussions and homophobic diatribes. There is a danger in a "neutral" curriculum. What might seem politically charged to one student is an essential matter of identity to another. "Neutral" courses will serve most poorly those students who are already most marginalized. (RS)

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Current Practices and Concerns of Teachers Integrating Lesbian and Gay Materials into the Composition Curriculum: Or, What Are We Doing and How Are We Doing It?

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Current Practices and Concerns of Teachers Integrating Lesbian and Gay Materials into the Composition Curriculum: Or, What Are We Doing and How Are We Doing It?

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My original goal in writing this paper was simple: as a teacher committed to designing and teaching lesbian and gay-inclusive courses, I was concerned, not simply by the people who questioned the legitimacy of this work, but even more so by those who, while they were personally supportive of my teaching or vocal in their affirmation of the importance of lesbian and gay concerns, had never taken the step of integrating these concerns into their own work as teachers. What I wanted to do then, was to see why those of us who are doing this work choose to do it and how we decide to go about it. In answering the why, I hope to address the concerns of the doubters, who see the realities of lesbian and gay life as somehow removed from the academic world in which their teaching exists. In exploring the how, I hope to offer possibilities for my colleagues who already accept the value of this work, and who are ready to take it on as their own.

This paper draws on a series of interviews I have conducted with teachers who have for some years now been creating lesbian and gay-inclusive courses. Most of the teachers included are lesbians, the exception is Ken Weisner, a colleague at UC Santa Cruz who is a straight, white male. I've supplemented these interviews with excerpts from my own written dialogues with myself about my own work in this area. In this sense, I am both subject and researcher.

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THE WHY OF IT: Our Students' Relationships with Writing

Teachers who create lesbian and gay-inclusive courses do so because this is intrinsic to their notion of good teaching. Although they sometimes use different language to describe it, all describe their teaching goals not simply as building academic competence in their students, but

also as fostering students' personal relationships with the written word. The word I use is intimacy. I talk about wanting my students to have an intimate relationship with language, and by this I mean all the things we usually mean when we talk about intimate personal relationships: something passionate, a relationship with rooms for secrets and arguments, a relationship not necessarily free of its rocky moments, but one that can weather those moments and emerge strengthened.

Ann Marie Wagstaff at the University of California, Davis, talks about responding to secrets and silences: "I encourage my students to question themselves and reach new truths. And you can't do that if there are big spaces of silence, things that can't be said."

Ken Weisner talks about "problematizing," about pushing students to explore the relationships in their own lives between the personal and the political. His vision of the interconnectedness between these two "worlds" means that academic writing can't be easily separated from personal writing, that writers need to be aware of the way the personal shapes their political and academic views and the ways that these in turn are reflected in their personal lives.

Ellen Louise Hart, another colleague of mine at UC Santa Cruz, who you will hear more from soon, uses the term "engaged" to describe the relationship she hopes to build between her students and the written word.

WHY: TEACHER AS ROLE MODEL/Being "Out" in the Classroom

The teachers I have talked to who are designing lesbian and gay-inclusive courses often speak of themselves as role models. Many of us, I know, often think of ourselves as modeling the role of "writer." It's standard practice for us to talk in the classroom about how we write, to compare in-class writing groups with our own collaborative relationships with colleagues. We

sometimes bring drafts of our work to classes to show how a piece changes from its conception to its completion.

For those of us who are lesbian and gay, this modelling can happen on two levels. I've saved all the bits and pieces I piled up while writing an essay for *The Lesbian in Front of the Classroom* (Her Books, 1989). I show students how I literally cut and paste--emptying an envelope full of confetti-like pieces of paper: sentences I excised from different drafts. I give them a copy of the final article and explain why I made the structural and stylistic choices I did.

But I would be being coy if I pretended that was all I was doing. I am also consciously modelling being a lesbian--doing work that is personally important to me, closely tied to my identity, and presenting this work to the world without apologies or explanations as something I am genuinely proud of. In doing this, I am modelling for my lesbian and gay students an identity that expects respect. I am showing them that they don't need to question the legitimacy of their own lesbian or gay perspectives. I am also offering straight students a model of a lesbian who is sure of herself, who doesn't hesitate, looking for their approval.

And this is an important part of what I do. I've gotten thank you notes from both gay and straight students, telling me how important it was to them that I identified myself as a lesbian, that I gave them time to come to terms with what that meant for them as individuals.

Those of us who do come out in class often do so as a sort of "pre-emptive strike." Ann Marie Wagstaff, for example, explains that she started identifying herself as a lesbian on the first day of class not so much for pedagogical reasons, but as a simple matter of self-protection. She was becoming increasingly active in a local drive to have the City Council adopt a gay civil rights ordinance. As the campaign heated up, she was becoming a highly visible spokesperson on behalf of the ordinance. She knew that any of her students who read the local or campus papers would quickly find out she was a lesbian--and as a teacher she wanted to have control

over when and how they found out.

My own case is somewhat similar. For three years now, a major component of the composition courses I teach has been a partnership with local fifth graders in a predominantly Mexicano school. My students all have fifth grade compañeros, and I work in the two fifth grade classrooms one day a week. When I started this work, I not only kept quiet about my lesbian identity at the elementary school--I also stopped identifying myself as lesbian in my University classes. I was painfully aware of the stereotypes many people harbor about lesbians and gay men--that we "recruit," that we're dangerous around children--and I feared that the whole University-elementary partnership could blow up in my face if my identity were "revealed."

Since then, I've decided that my fear of discovery is a much greater danger than my lesbianism itself. While I don't harp on it in class, I do want my University students to know I'm a lesbian. That way, if they harbor any negative stereotypes about lesbians and gay men as "recruiters," they'll be able to scrutinize my behavior with the fifth graders and see that it is all above board.

On the other hand, I'm profoundly disturbed by teachers who come out on the last day of class. To me, such an action has nothing to do with creating a lesbian and gay-inclusive course. Instead, such action gives a very negative message--that gay or lesbian orientation is something to be "revealed." It also shows an unwillingness on the part of the teacher to deal with the consequences of the revelation. I can see why teachers do it--they want to make a statement, they want to be visible, and they can't muster up more than a single day's worth of courage--but it simply doesn't strike me as sound. In fact, in many ways it is a sounder policy simply not to come out at all. That approach at least has the virtue of consistency, and I do think you can make lesbian and gay-inclusive space in your classroom without having to identify yourself as lesbian or gay, also without being lesbian or gay, in fact.

Karen Warren speaks of role models by describing the absence of these in her own life. She talks of the frustration of having had only one lesbian teacher as an undergraduate, a closeted woman who taught only "tame" Adrienne Rich poetry and who never allowed lesbian issues to be raised in her classroom, even when they were clearly not being tied in any way to her personal life. At San Francisco State, pursuing her Master's Degree, her experience was similar. Course readings included Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Virginia Wolfe, among others, but never dealt with these writers' lesbianism. Instead, their work was viewed in a way completely divorced from this part of their reality.

Ken Weisner, the one teacher in this sampling who is not lesbian or gay, also speaks of being a role model, this time for non-lesbian and gay students: "I'm modelling how to think about gay issues and gay people ... I'm modelling being straight."

TEXTS

Whatever a teacher's motivations for taking this work on, it is not taken on lightly. By virtue of the nearly complete absence of lesbian and gay voices from currently published composition readers, any teacher wanting to create a lesbian and gay-inclusive course will have to do so through deliberate effort, supplying supplementary readings.

The one text that is currently an exception to this generalization is Colombo, et al.'s *Rereading America,* which includes four pieces written from a lesbian or gay perspective. Yet, at least personally, I have found this text far from sufficient for creating a genuinely inclusive course. This inclusion of lesbian and gay voices is much less broad and much less representative than the representation of voices from other marginalized communities. While the editors provide perspectives on such topics as immigration and education from a range of ethnic-minority communities, lesbians and gay men speak exclusively on lesbian and gay issues, with

the exception of a piece of Jewish identity by Adrienne Rich. (The editors of the text do not identify her as a lesbian writer in their short biographical sketch that precedes the essay, so this text would not necessarily be treated at "lesbian" in the majority of classes where it is assigned.) In other words, while ethnic communities may have views on their children's schooling, for example, the lesbian and gay community is depicted as having no relationship at all to these crucial issues, despite the simple truth that lesbians and gay men and their children went to and are going to school and lead full, rich lives.

HOW: THE QUESTION OF SAFETY

Teachers thinking about creating lesbian and gay-inclusive courses sometimes worry, not unreasonably, about the safety of taking on this work. The marginal position of most composition faculty, who often work on quarter-by-quarter or year-by-year contracts or are forced to teach part-time at several colleges at once in order to make ends meet, requires a certain amount of caution on the job. This work is most easily accomplished by instructors working in programs like the one at Santa Cruz, that offer a great deal of latitude in designing first-year composition courses or who are already confident of having the respect and support of the program directors. (So few of us have tenure-track jobs that there is little point in mentioning the security of tenure, which can enable our colleagues in other disciplines to take on increasingly radical lesbian and gay-related work.)

An anecdote from the early teaching career of Ann Marie Wagstaff illustrates the risk that teachers sometimes take in creating lesbian and gay-inclusive courses, but also shows that these risks need not be insurmountable. While teaching Introduction to Literature as a teaching assistant (one of two first-year courses that satisfied the composition requirement at her university) she had as her poetry text an anthology mandated by the department--a collection

lacking not only lesbian and gay voices, but also women's voices. She supplemented this with poetry she photocopied herself and distributed in class. When the Director of Composition discovered that she was doing this, he told her that the program had a policy against bring in outside material--TAs were to use only department-approved texts--and she was to stop using this material in her course. She immediately began questioning other TAs to find out whether they were aware that such a policy existed and whether they used supplementary materials in their courses. Their responses were nearly unanimous--they'd never been informed of this policy and they routinely brought in outside materials. Armed with this information, and a petition signed by all her students supporting her choice of course readings, she defended herself before a composition committee hearing held to review her teaching practices. While the hearing was both frustrating and humiliating--faculty referred to her in the third person, despite the fact that she was present in the room--the committee ultimately ruled that teaching assistants could not be prohibited from bringing any supplementary materials into their classrooms. They instead modified program policy to allow for supplementary materials, while affirming that they needed to be genuinely supplementary--offered in addition to, rather than in place of, department-approved texts. The Director of Composition's contention that she was attempting to politically indoctrinate her students through her choice of readings was belied by their end-of-the-quarter evaluations of her teaching, which emphasized the freedom of speech they felt they'd had in her course, specifically because she invited them to consider and respond to voices ordinarily excluded from the college classroom.

HOW: STRUCTURE

While the availability of a text like *Rereading America,* might allow a curious teacher to "dabble in" the possibility of using lesbian and gay readings, such a casual approach can often

result in little learning, allowing homophobic students to affirm rather than question their stereotypes and not offering lesbian or gay students any real sense of representation.

One item that is absolutely crucial to creating effective lesbian and gay inclusive courses is structure. Both because these issues are so powerfully loaded and because they strike so closely to the hearts of many of our students--particularly those who are lesbian or gay or who have lesbian or gay family members or friends--we need to have for ourselves clearly articulated purposes and plans in taking on this work. This is not material to take into the classroom on a whim. An example from my own work as a teacher can demonstrate the dangers of this.

When I was a teaching assistant (not out in the classroom) teaching a section of composition, one of the things our program required we do was give a timed, in-class essay as a midterm. On a whim, I decided to make a local gay civil rights ordinance I was campaigning for the subject of that essay. That was a mistake--first, because I was heavily invested in the topic and clearly favored a particular stance on it; second, because nothing we had done in class up until then had prepared students to write comfortably or articulately about this issue.

I compounded my error by inviting two friends, who were also working on the ordinance, to come to the class to serve as a panel to talk about their identities as lesbians. *And then,* on the day of the class itself, I decided that it would be hypocritical of me to present them as lesbians without identifying myself--so I came out and joined the panel.

By the time I asked my students to write times essays on the subject of a local gay civil rights ordinance during the following class meeting, many of them were rightly furious with me.

This is not how to create an effective lesbian and gay-inclusive course.

For an example of the careful use of structuring to create a lesbian and gay-inclusive course, I will draw again on the excellent work of Ann Marie Wagstaff. The sequence described below begins about halfway through the quarter in her basic writing course that focuses on the

use of language, including a treatment of stereotyping. She initiates the classwork on stereotypes by putting on the board a list of fifteen labels--ranging from terms like "lesbian" and "illegal alien" to "activist" and "southerner." First, she asks students to write briefly about one of these labels. Then she asks students to pick five of the labels that go together and to write a short story about the person they describe. This is done in class, and during this time students find themselves moving from a stereotypical description to a richer, more complex portrait of the individual. This writing is followed by a discussion of "labels of primary importance"--labels that are most integral to an individual's identity or that are more heavily weighted by society. This discussion then moves on to a closer examination of the characters the students created, the ways the meanings of the labels changed as they wrote.

Ann Marie ends class by returning to the set of fifteen labels, explaining that they were originally based on real people. She explains who each of these people are--most recently one was a friend who is an illegal alien, the second was Senator Bill Bradley, the third was herself. "Lesbian" is one of her five labels.

Before the next class meeting, students are asked to read an essay by Louie Crew on being an out of the closet gay man. This time class discussion focuses on what it means to be "out." Students think about parts of their identity that are particularly comfortable or uncomfortable to name publically.

Finally, students are asked to write a personal essay on stereotyping and identity, due the following week. They are not required to write on lesbian and gay issues, but at this point can write about them comfortably and articulately if they choose to do so.

Unfortunately, not all lesbian and gay material is as thoughtfully presented as this. I am particularly concerned about the spirit in which lesbian and gay material is presented in the classroom. This material can often lead to volatile discussions, and sometimes composition

instructors mistake the volume of a discussion for a measurement of its success. This can be dangerous--particularly for lesbian or gay students and students with lesbian or gay family members and friends. While students should be able to use discussion to examine their own homophobia (fear and/or hatred of lesbians and gay men), the shouldn't be given the opportunity to launch into homophobic diatribes. it is our responsibility as instructors to see that discussions and essay topics don't turn into something like "Lesbians and Gay Men: Pro or Con?" When we do this, we are doing a service to no one. Unfortunately, while no member of our profession would allow a class to talk about "Should _____ (insert ethnic group here) be allowed to exist?" too often this is the only sort of treatment lesbians and gay men are given when they are included in our classrooms.

I want to conclude this essay by returning to the question of what it means to be a teacher, of what exactly our job is. One school of thought that's currently making itself heard loudly in the profession argues that it is inappropriate to focus classes on "political" issues. The belief of educators in this camp is that students asked to write on such topics will be more concerned with parroting the instructor's views (what do you want me to say?) than with developing their own ideas through writing. What these teachers advocate is the development of more "neutral" courses, courses that will not be controversial for any of our students.

But the simple fact is that a course cannot be neutral. I remember sitting in a beginning American Sigh Language course, watching the instructor explain for us in ASL the meanings of various seemingly innocuous signs indicating familial relationships. She used ASL to tell us stories about men and women falling in love, marrying, and having and raising children. She didn't notice me in the back of the room literally crying in frustration. The stories she was telling had nothing to do with my life, yet she was assuming they were universal.

I wrote an angry note to her at the end of class saying that I wanted the signs fro "lesbian" and "gay," that I wanted to know how to talk about my own life. I was elated when she began the next class by signing: "Two women meet, fall in love, marry," then giving us the sign "Lesbian."

What I want to do is show the dangers of a "neutral" curriculum. What might seem politically charged to one student is an essential matter of identity to another. As a general rule, "neutral" courses will serve most poorly those students who are already most marginalized.